HOME GROWN

One of Fannie Hurst's Unusual Stories

IN August the Beach Hotel placed cots in its upper corridors and doubled its rates. The local Bison convention, recruited from the great southwest, arrived with wives and stop-over-at-Chicago tourist tickets; Little Rock, Abilene, Kokomo and Poplar Bluff rocked on the lake side of the veranda and exchanged population, sunburn lotion, cat stitches and cigars.

The hotel menu immediately developed "Consomme Bison" and "Roast duckling au convention"; the management hung a stuffed Bison head, with a blue and white cheesecloth pennant caught between the teeth, over the dining-room entrance; out on the moonlit lake the convention sailed in hired boats and sang Bison songs and "The Blue Danube."

In the half-deserted lobby the room clerk pinned a blue and white celluloid button on his left coat lapel and promised thirty-three dry towels and a mosquito netting.

Miss Birdie Fink leaned across the counter and smiled into the room clerk's eyes; her own were blue and transcuctent as a summer lake.

"Say, Mr. Gilly—after you've taken the sag out of the bed in fifty-seven, put an extra wardrobe in the Indianapolis Grand Master's room, promised thirty-four a lake view and the convention a most popular lady contest and a potato race, would you mind ordering me up some ice water and telling me what's the earliest the 8:45 flier gets out of here tomorrow?"

Mr. Gilly smiled at her until two gold molars showed—the smile of Pierrot when Pierrette peered over his shoulder and set the sides of the world a-shaking with laughter.

"Will I send you up some ice water? Say, look at me like that again, Queenie, and you can have anything your little heart de-sires."

"Fink is the way they spell my name on the fly-leaf of the family Bible, Mr. Gilly—F-i-n-k—Miss Birdie Fink. It belongs to the same language as th word 'fresh'—ever hear it?"

"Believe me, if I wasn't on duty, Birdie, you wouldn't be chirping for your key before ten."

"I wouldn't be too sure!"

"You, with the beach still warm and a path of light leading straight up to a high-power moon, would make a combination that would stun a safe-blower. You only been three hours, kiddo—you don't want that eight-forty-five."

"If I'd known I was running into a family convention I'd stayed at home and took my vacation feeding the swans in Central Park or took an ocean voyage to Coney."

"The minute you blew in here this afternoon I says to myself, I says, 'That little girl's in wrong.'"

"Did you, honest?"

"Sure—that little look in your eyes and the black and white checked suit and black sailor hat with the black and white checked band you was wearing spelled home and 42d street in such big letters it was all I could do to keep the tears from falling in the ink and mussin' it up while you registered."

"I know the feelin'."

"Stick around a while, Queenie—there ain't any live ones around here and it's slow as hot toffy, but I'm off duty tomorrow at four. I'll take you around and show you the island."

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MISS Fink sagged her slim figure outward at the waist line until she assumed the sans vertebra droop that Manet and his school loved to paint—the boneless slump of the apparently ill ladies who are the indirect descendants of that same school and who train themselves across the covers of the fashion journals.

"And this is the dump Maisie Smyth told me had Atlantic City wiped off the map. What I think of her taste in summer resorts I'm going to write her now if you'll send me some ink."

"Maisie Smyth—not the little queen that was out here last month doing the recuperating act?"

"That's her! We're head ladies on the same floor."

"Sure enough?"

"I didn't know there was a Michigan till Maisie came back and had every girl in the department so dizzy with pine woods and moonlit lakes that by the time my two weeks came around I didn't know whether I was sellin' a Poiret model trimmed in moonlight on the water, or ridin' up 5th avenue in a boat shaped like a cigar."

"Some little girl was Maisie Smyth!"

"Yes, Maisie was lucky enough to lay down with typhoid fever just after she sold the thousand-dollar gown to Gertrude Meyers, in 'Believe Me, Cleopatra,' and the house sent her out to the pines on half pay. I don't grudge it to her. Gawd knows she worked hard enough for it—I sold last year's to Classy Geradier for her opening in 'The Lightning Bug.'"

"Ain't it a joke, though—you a head lady at Rentley's—I was a clerk for a whole year at the Cosmopolitan, right in back of you."

"I had a customer used to live there."

"Say, but maybe Maisie Smyth didn't have a swell time out here—the Chicago Drummers' convention was on the whole time, and say!"

"Believe me, little old Atlantic City is good enough for me—it makes this place look like Coney on a wet night. What time did you say the 8:45 pulls out?"

"Aw, stick it out, sis; things may pick up and I'm off duty tomorrow at 4."

"That don't mean anything in my life!"

"Say, I bet I've seen you down at the shore!"

"It was little me."

"I was at the Sea Lion for three seasons. I used to know all the girls from Rentley's and Langerburg's and them swell houses that used to come down on their vacations."

"Sure, I chum with all that crowd!"

"Whatta you know about that."

"Yep!"

"Take it from me, Queenie, there ain't real class to these dumps out here; there's only been one live crowd here all season, and they was the cigar drummers. This bunch around here wouldn't have a chance in a snail marathon."

"I took my vacation down at the shore for four summers and say, for swell times!"

"It's the first time I've been west of Syracuse myself, kiddo, and take it from me, there's nothing to it!"

"Ain't it so?"

"Ten dollars a day and up, marble lobby and Circassian walnut trimmings is more my pace; the first September breeze that whispers through these pines is going to blow me back to Broadway."

Miss Fink glanced about the lobby, at the wicker rockers, mostly empty and tilted slightly backward; at the post-card and cigar stand, with a sleeping clerk, and above the counter a string of magazines hung like clothes from a line; at the bison head above the dining-room entrance, glass eyed, and hung with the cheese-cloth pennant.

"Gee!"

"Cheer up, Queenie; tomorrow I'm off at 4."

"I——"

"Well, look who's here! Well, Prokes, what have you got to say for yourself? Why ain't you out with the sailing party? Say, ain't you the greatest fellow for dodging the ladies."

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MR. PROKES loitered up to the desk, planted an elbow on the counter and flung one knee across the other so that he leaned at an oblique. An inch cone of ashes trembled and tumbled from his cigar down his waistcoat.

"I leave them things to the young ones, Gilly. What's an old one like me doing off on a party with marrieds and a bunch of striplings. I been out hittin' a new trail through the pines that I'll bet the original Indians hereabouts ain't too familiar with."

"You ought to be able to find better than scenery for company around here, Prokes, get acquainted with Miss Fink, a little girl from the big town."

"How-do-do."

"How-do-do."

"Gowaan, get acquainted and show each other a good time. Prokes is the Grand Mogul of Miami on the Miami, Birdie, and the Heap Big Chief of the Southwest Order of the Well Fed Bison."

"Quit callin' me names, Gilly."

"He says Miami on the Miami's got the Noo York water-front run clear off the picture post-cards and that the only and original hayseeds are grown between the Battery and the Bronx. Get together, you two, and lemme referee the game."

Miss Fink smiled, dangled her black earrings against her white neck, showed the gleam of her teeth behind her lips and raised her narrow shoulders, with the open-work blouse showing the mystery of pink ribbon through it.

"How-do-do, Mr. Prokes? What I'm trying to get at is this: If you're all the things you say you are, what ain't you?"

Mr. Prokes extended a large, warm hand; his sand-colored mustache retreated a bit to reveal the damaging gold evidence of small town dentistry.

"I—I ain't noticed you around here before, Miss Fink."

"He's stringing you, Queenie. For all he knows you might have been at the door to welcome him when he came last week. He's got about as much interest in skirts as I have in Miami on the Miami."

"If this young lady had been around here, I'd have seen her all right.

"You can't jolly her, Prokes—she comes from the town where they hand it out like trading stamps. This handsome young man to my right, Queenie, is as afraid of skirts as I am of having to spend another summer west of Jersey.

"Don't you believe it, Miss Fink. A fellow like me, when he gets to be fair, fat and nearly forty, knows it's time to take the flower out of his buttonhole."

"Not if it's a bachelor button," quoth Mr. Gilly, slapsticking repartee a merciless whack.

"If I though I stood a show next to my slick young friend here, maybe I'd shake the road dust of Miami out of my eyes, answer a hair restoring advertisement, climb into a narrow shouldered in-at-the-waist coat and twirl a flexible bamboo cane down Broadway myself!"

Miss Fink glanced at Mr. Prokes with the upward sweetness of a Fra Lippo Lippi virgin.

"Say, maybe you're right about the original hay meadows laying between 34th and 42d streets, but, honest, Mr. Prokes—honest, what is Miami, a breakfast food or a disease?"

Mr. Gilly clapped his hand on his polished thatch of black hair and leaned across the counter with his elbows planted on the register book.

"That's right, go to it!"

"Miami, Miss Fink, ain't one of the breakfast foods that helped make the Broadway electric signs famous; it ain't even an expensive disease like appendicitis or motoritis; it's a burg, Miss Fink, that ain't even got a dot after it on the map."

"Thanks."

"A burg with grass growing between the bricks and story-and-a-half cottages with pointy roofs like the toy houses they manufacture in the Cisalpian Alps."

"Gowaan, old man, don't let her scare you off."

"Yes, and a main street with chairs tilted under every awning, and a street car system that would give Gilly here a laughing fit that would make him a pet case for the medical journals."

"Hear—hear!" cried Mr. Gilly, his mouth turned upward in a crescent.

"I know—I know! My chum, Maisie Smyth, came from a town called Reedsburg. Every time she passes the horse car down on 3d avenue she gets an 'our town' look in her eyes that means a letter home to her stepmother and a mother-of-pearl teething ring with silver bells for her sister-in-law's kid."

"For a girl with a big-town look in her eyes and the metal of the big town in her voice, you got some awful nice small-town ways about you, Miss Fink."

"Now, he's kiddin' again, ain't he, Mr. Gilly?"

"Say, I didn't know it was in him."

"I can tell you some more about yourself, Mr. Prokes."

"Good."2

"There ain't an 'our town' on the map without a swimmin' hole and an oldest inhabitant who once shook hands with Abraham Lincoln."

"Some clever little girl; ain't she, Prokes?"

"Every back porch in 'our town' is used for the two and sole purposes of supportin' wistaria vines and coolin' the famous pies that mother used to make—no vaudeville rural sketch is complete without the cotton-back satin finish wistaria vine or the papier mache tree stump, center left."

"No, we ain't got a swimmin' hole, Miss Fink, the——"

"That's right; keep it dark!"

"—the river's rapid clear down as far as Hamilton, but the Y. M. C. A. put a swell tank up in their rooms on High street—ten-foot concrete basin and water any temperature on the thermometer."

"Oh, you Miami!"

"Come out on the lake with me, Miss Fink, and I'll paddle you out toward the moon and tell you some more about 'our town'."

"Migawd! What a night's work I've done," cried Mr. Gilly. "Charley Prokes paddling a goil out to the moon!"

"Oh, Mr. Prokes, ain't you kind? Here I was ready to go upstairs, read the time table and cry into my pillow."

"Come on, sister."

Forked lightning flashed from her eyes.

"Don't care if I do."

"Believe me," said Mr. Gilly, "if I wasn't on night duty, Miss Birdie, I'd beat him to it."

"You stay at home and water the goldfish, Gilly; they need it. Gimme your shawl and lemme carry it, Miss Fink."

They smiled and parried and the silk fringe on the scarf caught on his sleeve button, and they must untangle it with more smiles and parrying.

"Good night, Gilly."

"Good night, Mr. Gilly."

"Don't upset and muss up the lake, you two."

Laughter.

Then through the lobby with little jumps like grace notes in their walk, and the screen door of the veranda slammed behind them. Next down wooden stairs with their light feet touching each alternate step; a brief stretch of gravel walk, gloomy with arching cedars, and finally before them the diamond beach in the diamond white moonlight.

"Oh-h-h!"

"Some little nights we have out this way, sister—ain't they?"

"Look, the sand's all silver—all silver."

"Yes, special process we have."

"And these are the canoes Maisie ranted about—say, ain't they cute?"

"How do you like that long one there—the little shell with sides like a greyhound—she cuts the water like a knife cuts butter."

"Oh, Mr. Prokes, I can't get in that little thing—it'll turn over."

"Not with me—gimme you hand there, sister—easy—easy—no, in the middle—there ain't nothing to scream about—wait—there—ah!"

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THEY slid out into the water like a phantom shell that rides the lake without even opening the bosom of the water with its keel; then Mr. Prokes dipped his paddle and steered straight for the yellow path of the moon.

"I always say I want to go to heaven either floatin' on my back, and the water lappin' and lullin' me, or cuttin' along in the thinnest-sided canoe a Indian ever whittled."

Miss Fink reclined against her cushion, a moon-bathed Naiad full of languor. The inverted bowl of night was shallow and pricked with a million close stars. Lying there, it seemed to Miss Fink that if she reached out and plucked one it would tremble and titillate in her hand like an ember of white fire and die without singeing her palm.

"The nearest I've ever been to this is rowin' in Bronx Park. Gee, ain't this quiet? I feel like I was listenin' to Maisie recite 'The Rosary' to music."

The dip-dipping of the paddle, the rustle of water against the delicate sides of the canoe, the string of village lights, the yellow windows of the hotel receding—receding.

"Life ain't much after all, Miss Fink, except water and air and light—and plenty of them—and the smell of pine, and a nibble on your line, and sunrise on wet treetops and God and love in your heart; a fireside or steam radiator o' winter, and a pretty girl with moonlight caught in her hair for August and the heated spell."

"You sound like the Salvation Army gone into musical comedy."

"Lay still there, sister—a canoe's like a nervous horse if you tickle its ribs. Anyway, when you lay there like that you look like a calendar we got hanging in the kitchen called 'Comfort in a Kitchenoff Folding Canoe.'"

"Say, Mr. Prokes——"

"Yes, sister."

"Keep your face that way a minute, with the light on the side there like that—say—say, didn't you ever buy goods from Benson & Sons, cloaks and suits, East Broadway?"

He dipped his first uneven stroke and regarded her with his gray eyes, frankly wide.

"Say, sister, you ain't Anna Eva Fay doing the middle west incog., are you? I've bought misses' cloaks and ladies' cloth skirts from Benson's since before they moved up from East 11th street. Paw before me bought from Old Man Benson long before my time, when they started up with two sewing machines and a one-window loft. The Red Trunk ain't been without a line of Benson's goods since I can remember."

"I knew I'd seen you somewheres—your face was as familiar to me as my board bill."

"You ain't——"

"No, but I used to be—Benson's is the first firm I ever worked for—I started in when I was fourteen, doin' misses' model for him."

"'Misses' model?'"

"I bet I've tried on more than one or two or six misses' ulsters for you to pick from. Gawd, that was seven years ago, but even now, when I sell a three-quarter, double-breasted, reversible yachting coat, them little scratchy, loft-made, sateen-lined coats with the cotton stitching and sweatshop buttonholes, come back and scratch the back of my neck, just like they used to do."

"Well, whatta you know! To think of my ever havin' bought ulsters for the Red Trunk off'n you—a little pink and white flower like you, sproutin' in Benson's."

"You used to come in with the early September buyers. I remember seein' you more'n once in the little back salesroom, with Old Man Benson offering you a cigar every time you yanked me to the daylight, to see how green the lot 27 black ulsters were."

"And look at you now, living like a little lady—vacation and all."

"I may be a head lady at Rentley's now, but take it from me, Mr. Prokes, it's a long and crooked lane from Benson's and six a week to four times six and green velvet floors on the avenue."

"Rentley's is one of them dead-lookin' places, ain't it?—with no sign out and no show windows or nothin' except a butler with leather calves and white bloomers and a ribbon rosette on the side of his high hat for a door display."

"Something like a morgue, yes. I says to Maisie the other day, I says: 'From East Broadway to that part of 5th avenue where they quit sellin' dresses and begin to sell gowns only ain't so far if you cover it in your limousine, but when you get there by way of a three-year stop-off in a 6th avenue cloak department and a four-year sidetrack in a 34th street novelty shop it's going some.'"

"Poor little sister!"

"Your panting like a chorus after the third encore by the time you reach the 'Imported Gowns—Only' and can afford a second-story front with running water and two tailor-made suits a year if you save it on lunch and take a room within walking distance."

Old gold light lay on them and sparkled in the tiny crinkles of current they created; the ghostly sail of a pleasure boat moved across the horizon; a woman's voice, thin and full of plaint, came from its direction and died on the water as smoke dies in air. The far-off hotel windows blinked out one by one—the moon was directly above them, higher, whiter, smaller.

"You and Gilly got the wrong idea, Miss Fink; rushing through life like you do in subway trains don't give you much time to see the scenery, does it?"

"No, or to hear singin' voices over the water."

"I can show you a story-and-a-half cottage in Miami, with awnings to keep the sun out and a back yard with props under the trees to keep the fruit from breaking the limbs, that would make the swell velvet furniture in your second-story front and running water raise its nap for shame at taking your money. Say, ain't that pretty. I bet that's the little lady from Duluth singing for the sailing party."

"Swell."

"Listen!"

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea;
Blow, blow, breezes blow,
Wind of the western sea.

"Come on, et's join in, Miss Fink."

"I don't know that."

"Gee, I was raised on that lullaby."

"I know a swell lullaby song. It's a swell trot, too."

When they play that ragtime lullaby—

Lull—a—by-y-y—
Lull—a—by-y-y.

"Say, I could die trotting to that."

"Lay still there, sister."

"Ain't you tired paddling, Mr. Prokes?"

"Tired! I've paddled twelve hours straight up the Miami, and not in such good company neither. At the last convention at Bear lake I paddled for the Kansas City Lodge cup, and won it!"

"You're sure some big frog in these puddles out here!"

He swung lightly about for the homeward cut. Through the mist of late evening, the string of village lights was without luster, like a giant lady's necklace seen through the blur of her giant tears.

"I—I ain't much of a lady's man, Miss Fink—it's just like Gilly told you; but, gee, this has been great, paddling you out here in the moonlight."

"Say, I bet you're the champion lady-killer of Miami."

"I ain't called on a girl in six years, that's how much of a lady-killer I am."

"That's what they all say."

"You can ask anybody in our town. I ain't called on a girl in six years or kept steady with a young lady since I used to sneak the horse out and take Lizzie Watts buggy riding when I was seventeen and ought to have known better."

You with New York twice a year, cuffs on your trousers and your name at the top of the Red Trunk stationery—say!"

"You got me wrong, sister."

"I can just see the girls in your town begin to walk down High street for their afternoon soda before you got the wax ladies in your show window and $16.50 serviceabe suits uncovered for the day."

"That's where you got me wrong again, little one. I'm a funny sort of fellow, I am. After the old folks went I just lived along in the place with black Mary same as ever."

"Honest?"

"Sure enough—helpin' all the skirts I went to school with fix it up with the other fellow and stickin' pretty close to the store myself. Lordy, sister, I got more godchildren than Solomon had wives."

"Look over there, will you, Mr. Prokes? We're almost back again. Say, wasn't that quick work?"

"I'll show you some real paddling the next time I bring you out here."

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LAND swam to meet them. Houses and church steeples and the hotel resumed their shapes, and in their nostrils the sudden and pungent smell of pine needles.

"This was sure some ride, Mr. Prokes. I kinda feel like we'd just paddled out of the world and left livin' behind us. Listen to her—say, ain't she some little warbler?"

"We ain't left livin' behind, a-tall, Miss Fink—this here is the real kind of living, peace and—well, just peace."

"Gee, ain't life, funny!"

"For a little lady like you it ought always to be as sweet as wistaria."

"It's a regular moving picture, ain't it?—one blooming thing after another."

"We should worry!"

"Two nights ago this time I was sittin' under a gold leaf ceiling eating Italian spaghetti and listening to a Hungarian band play the 'Broadway Glide'."

"I know the kind—seventy-five cents table d'hoty—with a wine bottle of red ink thrown in. Out in Miami we wouldn't use it for dye if we wanted to color the Miami pink."

"And look, tonight I'm out here in a canoe with a man from a town that sounds like a patent medicine, so close to the stars I could kiss 'em and floating through the middle of a night that's got it all over the purple and silver model I sold the day before I left. How Maisie grudged me that sale!"

"And you're getting acquainted with a sky over your head that you never even saw before except between tall buildings when you looked up to decide if you was going to carry an umbrella."

"Sometimes when the Welsh-rabbit ain't cooked enough or you've talked your heart and soul out the day before tryin' to sell a six-hundred-dollar import to a New-Rich, who used to 'sell 'em herself and knows the game—sometimes you get to floatin' off like this, too, but then you begin to fall over the edge of things and wake up. Oh-h! Be careful how you land, Mr. Prokes."

"Easy there—no hurry—take your time—here now, your hand—always stand in the middle of a boat—whoop-la—so!"

"Oh-h, I——"

"Nonsense—look, you stepped out as neat as a sardine from his can."

"It's been a swell ride, Mr. Prokes."

"What about tomorrow night, Miss Fink—paddlin' you is the best fun I've had at this convention."

"Tomorrow! Ain't that a shame now—Mr. Gilly's off duty at 4 and he's going to row me over to a little island. But say—I can be back by 10 if it ain't too late for you."

"Sure it ain't. I'd wait later than that to paddle a sweet little girl like you."

"Good!"

"There's going to be a swell dance a week from tomorrow night, Miss Fink—installin' the new grand masters and the closin' of the convention. I ain't much on dancin', and it's a long way off, but I'd kinda like to know you're going with me."

"Sure."

"Great! This way, sister, we'll take the long road through the pines."

"Gee, ain't it black in there and quiet?"

She closed her hand over his rough coat sleeve with the primitive gesture of a child.

"You ain't scared when you're with me, are you, little sister?"

"Scared, nothin'."

She linked her arm in his and her laughter scuttled back over the water.

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THE magenta light of declining day lay on the water and reddened it as if monsters were spilling gore in a subaquatic battle. A low, far-away sun that had lost much of its heat and no longer dazzled the eyes, slipped, as if a most delicately contrived windlass was letting it down cog by cog into the horizon. For a second it rested on the surface of the water, then dipped, broke the circle and dropped gradually down into its tomorrow.

Miss Fink clicked down her pink parasol and shifted her position on the sand. Her feet were curled under her like a shah's.

"Say, wouldn't a model tunic gown draped in hot-looking pink chiffon, the same color as that camel-shaped cloud out there, be swell?"

"Neat little sky, aint' it? I know a fellow made a fortune out of an idea like that—Al Levy; he's the fellow put out the Sunset Sextette Girls that was such a scream in four-a-day vaudeville last year. I knew him when he was sellin' tickets in front of the Rialto in the old scalper days."

"All aboard for Sunset Land— tra la la la—tra la la."

"Sure, that's the act! I knew all them little girls like they was my sisters. I remember Daisy de Vere when she was carrying a fifth company of the Gaiety Girls. Daisy always knew when her show came in off the road and she could get a dollar room—and off me—and pay me when her luck turned. Them was the good old days at the Rialto House—good old days."

A theme or retrospection, subsidiary, but insistent as a left-hand theme marching beneath the trill of trebie arpeggios, crept into Mr. Gilly's voice; he burrowed an equaly retrospective forefinger knuckle deep into the sand, drew it out and peered into the little well.

"Them was good old days—I never ought to have left Broadway for the resorts nohow—gettin' back is like a character man tryin' to convince a manager he can play juvenile. But, say, kiddo, if you'll wear a muzzle while you're cutting cookies with the lid of a baking powder can. Gee, a little of that would make the silk velour in the Turkish room at Churchey's raise its nap for shame at takin' your money."

"Migawd, whisper that line of talk in a phonograph record, Birdie-birdie—and I'll send it to Maisie for a centennial present."

"Silly!"

"Rave on, I can manage you if you get violent."

"What's them lights over there, Gilly?"

"That's Bay Shore—another dump like ours, only they got a picture show and two hotels and dancin' on Friday nights——"

She raised her head, like a hound scenting its trail.

"Dancin'—lead me to it, honey; lead me to it!"

"Keep cool and Fletcherize your ham sandwich, Cleopatry—Friday nights was what I said—Friday nights—and I'm on dooty!"

Miss Fink waved her sandwich above her head, so that the long arm of her shadow danced across the sand.

Oh, that teasing, teasing tango—
Swoop! Oh, how it makes your brain go.
Let's start that teasing fa-a-ango!

"GEE, FORTY A WEEK! ON FORTY A WEEK I COULD RIDE IN A TAXI WITH MY BACK TO THE METER!"

The gray light of dusk suddenly enveloped them; the lake was glassy-topped like a cistern, and behind them a darkening tangle of woods full of the twilight gibberish of birds.

"Gee, forty a week! On forty a week I could ride in a taxi with my back to the meter; I could buy a plot of 5th avenue for a truck garden; I—I could even get married, Birdie."

"Or buy an underground balloon."

They laughed in soft, furry voices, that had unconsciously taken on the quietude of dusk.

"Look over there, Gilly—the hotel's beginning to light up."

"What I think of that dump!"

"I bet right now the whole Bison convention is ringing for more towels and shaving water, and every man's wife of 'em is unpacking the tray of her trunk and shaking the small town sweet lavender and crinkles out of a made-in-the-house summer silk that would get a laugh out of a clown off duty."

"I notice you're pretty strong for the small towns yourself, Morning Glory. I ain't heard nothing more about that eight-forty-five flyer since you and Miami went out to the moon last night."

"Quit your kiddin'."

"Go to it, sis—he's the prize Bison of the whole herd, with a bank account I could wish on myself—don't let straw in his hair and ashes down his vest front scare you off. Oh, you Red Trunk!"

"Aw you!"

"Likes you pretty well, don't he, Queenie? He watched us paddle off like he'd give a half interest in his Miami bank stock to be in my place."

"Yest—he—would—not!" sung in a voice to deny her negation.

Mr. Gilly dusted his hands of sand particles, rolled over luxuriously on his side, climbed to his feet and stretched wide his arms like a sun god standing at the edge of a day. He was a white flannel epic in sartorial art, a heroic expression of trousers creased to the knife edge and wide-cuffed to reveal, yet conceal, white-clocked hose, so sleazy that the knob of his ankles strained thinner the silk. A white silk shirt fluted in front and bloused to a correct negligee snapped in the breeze, and with it all the carefully careless hair, the unimportant features and the too large horse-shoe scarf-pin that distinguishes the sophomore from the scholar, the weevil from the worker, the gent from the gentleman.

"Stay where you are, Birdie, and I'll hike down to the canoe for the basket. We'll spread the eats on the sand and build a bonfire till the moon comes up. We're going to have some little feat—real cut-ups we are—wouldn't they give us the laugh at home?"

He bounded down the slope of beach lightly, the spray of kicked-up sand shooting from under his white canvas shoes.

They dined like two gnomes, with the fire dancing in their eyes and over their hair and down their backs and their own shadows, curiously elongated and stretched on the sand beside them, full of mystery and absurd with the mimicry of their own gyrations.

"Have a pickle, Birdie-birdle——"

"Don't care if I do."

"Are you happy, girlie?"

"Well, I guess."

"S'more cakes?"

"Nope."

"Whatta you think of our party, sister—real gay, ain't we?"

"Some party."

"You're the kind of girlie I'd like to take to a real lobster supper. Gee, the swell little parties I've had at Churchey's — nice little congenial crowd—that's me all over—nice little crowd like that and I can hug daylight's out of myself for joy!"

"Churchey's is one little dream of a place—they got the swellest dance floor in town!"

"Don't I know it!"

"But—oh, I don't know, but—since—since I been out here, with the pine air that kind of bites into your lungs, and the moon so close you can taste it to see if it's a camembert or gorgonzola, I—I ain't so keen on rushing through life on subway trains."

"Hear—hear! Say, outside of Noo York you'd thrive like an orange grove in Alaska."

"Gee, a story-and-a-half cottage in M—Michigan, with a garden and props under the trees to keep the fruit from breaking them, and a paling fence all around to keep the kiddies in while you're cutting cookies with the lid of a baking powder can. Gee, a little of that would make the silk velour in the Turkish room at Churchey's raise its nap for shame at takin' your money."

"Migawd, whisper that line of talk in a phonograph record, Birdie-birdie—and I'll send it to Maisie for a centennial present."

"Silly!"

"Rave on, I can manage you if you get violent."

"What's them lights over there, Gilly?"

"That's Bay Shore—another dump like ours, only they got a picture show and two hotels and dancin' on Friday nights——"

She raised her head, like a hound scenting its trail.

"Dancin'—lead me to it, honey; lead me to it!"

"Keep cool and Fletcherize your ham sandwich, Cleopatry — Friday nights was what I said — Friday nights—and I'm on dooty!"

Miss Fink waved her sandwich above her head, so that the long arm of her shadow danced across the sand.

Oh, that teasing, teasing tango—
Swoop! Oh, how it makes your brain go.
Let's start that teasing fa-a-ango!

"Oh, no you don't out here, kiddo. Wait till Saturday night and you'll see the way the gay birds do it out here—the lancers and the Virginia reel's the limit."

"The Virginia what?"

"One night me and your friend Maisie tried three steps of the Boston glide and I ain't been so nearly out of a job since the Seaside Hotel fire."

Swoop! Oh, how it makes your brain go.
Umph—numph—umph-umph-umph—umph!

"Aw, cut it out there, girlie—what you teasin' me for? Gee, if I had you down at Churchey's this minute!"

* * * *

MISS Fink's eyes were like slits, her shoulders and her waist and her voice swayed with the hesitating rhytam of a worshiper of Buddha under his bo tree.

"Do you know the Singalese dip. It's the hardest of them all, Gilly——"

"I'm the neatest little dipper you ever seen—ask 'em when you go back if they know me up at the 59th street Pallay doo Dance."

He tossed the remnant of his sandwich into the lake and pirouetted to his feet, as if the song of his soul was being played to dance music.

"I'll tell you what let's do, sis—it's a half-hour row to Bay Shore. Let's go over to the movies—it's better than overworking this scenery game."

"There comes the moon!"

"Yes, it's a habit out here—but come on, they got a imitation of a show over there and a place called Luna Park that would give Coney the hysterics if she saw it; but it's the liveliest spot around here. Come on, are you game?"

"Sure."

The wings of their bonfire had flown into the night; only the sullen embers remained, red eyes guarding the remnants of their cannibalistic feast. They scurried down the beach and into their bobbing canoe. As they pushed away the red eyes blinked out suddenly, as if a night bird had died on watch, and the gloom was immediately a shade bluer and the mucillanimous mist of night rose off the water.

"You're a nice boy, Gilly; but gee, you're a bum paddler. You jerk a boat around like a subway train coming to a quick stop. Say, look at that moon, will you, like a red Chinese lantern hung from a star."

"Yes."

"La-la, tra la, tra la la la—tra la—"

"Sing to me, Birdie-birdie—I'm game on the poetry stuff if you are. That's one of the main excitements up here—singin' on the water!"

Through the catacombic gloom they smiled at each other.

"When they play that ragtime lullaby——"

"No—lemme begin over again——"

"Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea-e-e-e——
Blow—blow—tra la—la——'

"I'll remember the rest in a minute."

Mr. Gilly plied a rapid paddle.

"We won't go home until mornin',
We won't go home until mornin'——'

"Won't we, Gilly?"

"Sure we will. I'll have you back in your two-a-day, southern exposure, a little while after the convention is finished singing its 11 o'clock song and has presented the grand master of the Kokomo Lodge with a silver loving cup and tied the vote between Elkhart Lake and Minneapolis for the next convention."

"Oh, gee!"

"What?"

"I—I—say, what time is it by your gold watch and chain?"

"Nine-thirty—the night is young, Morning Glory."

"I—aw, who wants to go over to that little old dump, anyway, Gilly! It looks like a good spot for your favorite funeral. I—I gotta—wantta bo back by 10—I forgot something."

Mr. Gilly slowed his stroke; his mouth took on a slight oblique slant of distemper.

"Don't let me keep you up, Miss Fink."

"Let's turn around, Gilly. I bet them movies over there would put a night owl to sleep. Gee, how dead it looks—let's turn back."

"Sure thing."

He swung around so suddenly that she clutched at the sides of the shell for balance.

"Gee—you got a temper like steel."

Silence.

"Don't you get so sore easy, though!"

"I ain't sore."

The vigorous dipping of the paddle and the swift cutting of water.

"Say, Gilly, ain't you afraid of breaking the speed laws?"

Silence.

A star streaked downward and died in its flight. Miss Fink lay flat backward in the boat, her face foreshortened and upturned.

"Shootin' star's luck, ain't it, Gilly?"

"Dunno."

She nestled deeper into her cushion, one arm flung high in a semicircle about her head and her lids so low over her eyes that she might have been a sleeping Adriana.

Drip—Drip-p! They floated silently, in a rustle of moving waters.

A smile trembled across Miss Fink's lips, and she opened them so that her voice came softly, softly.

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea,
Blow, blow, breezes blow,
Wind of the western sea-e-e-e——

The Beach Hotel gleamed yellow from every window, as if it were posing for a picture post-card or where-to-spend-your-vacation pamphlet.

The dining room was cleared of its aisle-forming tables and its floor polished to a mirror. At the far end of the room a clock pricked out in blue and white electric bulbs gleamed against a blue-and-white cheesecloth background.

Tropical palms, with skillfully dyed fronds and twined halfway up with brown cotton moss, huddled in a little jungle around the piano and violin accompaniment. Straight around the desert of room, chairs, backs to wall and legs touching, awaited action as a stage library setting, discovered at the rise of curtain, awaits the entrance of the French maid in her four-dollar silk stockings to tickle the furniture and the audience with a tiny feather duster and tinier French accent.

After a while the scratching of a violin for its note and the one-finger tum-m-m—tum-m-m on the piano; the light blather of voices rising to a swell. Unstylish women in shotted silk dresses with waist lines and decen width in skirts and bodices cut high over bosoms that would have quivered under barrenness. The invitational rhythm of waltz music and a pink-haired violinist swaying in the palm jungle. A couple glided out into the sahara of polished floor, another and yet another.

Presently the bobbing throng, the women flushed with their primal love of the dance, the men in fast-wilting collars and out of step. Mr. Prokes inserted a third handkerchief, bib-fashion, inside his fainting collar and took Miss Fink in an antiquated embrace of the waltz. His hand, outstretched against her back, completely covered the area between the shoulder blades and lay heavy against its chiffon.

"Whew!"

"For the new grand master you ain't doing bad, Proksey—you've taken every man's wife of 'em around, ain't you?"

Mr. Prokes mopped at his face with his fourth handkerchief and writhed in his evening clothes as if he would fly their broadcloth.

"Yes, but it's almost over. The 11 o'clock song and the passing of the loving cup, and then I'm ready, sister, for what I been waintin' for all evening—guess!"

"Can't!"

"The prettiest and sweetest little girl in the crowd and a little gray-colored canoe. I—I don't like it a bit, your dancin' around here with all these other fellows—you just wait till I'm off duty."

"What I think of these guys!"

"I ain't much on dancing myself, little sister, but I'm game—but watch me after the 11 o'clock song puts me off duty and I've started the lovin' cup around! You and me, sister, and the little gray shell. Ready now, one—two—three—ready—now—go!"

Miss Fink pirouetted skilfully around Mr. Prokes' heavy-footed amble, a wood nymph matching her dainty pace to her favorite Bruin of the forest.

"Good, Proksey—that was a swell reverse. Say, there's a fortune for a dancing teacher out this way."

"One—two—three!"

"Ouch! Lemme try to guide. No; now start over again; just try to kinda keep your feet where mine ain't and you'll come out all right."

"One—two——"

"So—good—now you're all right. No, that was my fault. Reverse again—Ouch!"

"I—I give it up, sister."

"Whew!"

"It just ain't right to ask a little fairy like you to steer me around. How'd you like to go out in a quiet corner of the veranda and cool off; it's ten minutes before the shoutin' and we can wait out where it's quiet."

"Yep, it is hot in here, ain't it?"

Mr. Prokes breathed as if for a lung capacity test, inserted a fourth handkerchief into the limp rag of collar and held wide the screen door. A rush of air lifted his hair and dried the beads on his brow.

* * * *

LIGHT dresses and light voices drifted from black corners of the veranda and from the recesses of rocking chair. A chain of Japanese lanterns stretched between two pillars, swung and flickered, and out above the cedars, standing darkly with their crowns against the sky, a lopsided moon with a swollen and inflamed face, invited them.

"Whew, this is more like it! Here's two chairs. There ain't no use talking, I'm more at home on a ice field than a dance floor. I just ain't got the knack."

"Say, after that long-legged fellow from Wichita walked over my ankles and completely destroyed my instep, you seem like a toe dancer doing the powder puff."

"My, but you do look pretty tonight, Miss Fink."

"Aw!"

"Here, faster this buttonhole rose of mine in your hair; it just matches your cheeks. Pretty as a picture you look, you do."

The music was suddenly remote and cut off by an ell of the building; fair quiet lay like a veil. Miss Fink receded into the impressionistic mood of night, her pink chiffon scarf drooped from her shoulders like wings.

"Oh, dear!" she sighed twice, leaned backward and let her hands fall limp along the arms of her chair. Her sighs trembled for a moment and died.

"What's the matter, little sister?"

"Nothin'."

"Well, girlie—it—it's all over but the shoutin', ain't it?"

"All over. I'm leaving on the 8:45 and you on the noon, ain't you?"

"The 12:30——"

"It's been a swell ten days, Gee, and I thought I wasn't going to like it out here."

"I—I just don't know what the place would have been without you, Miss Birdie. Just the life of things you were."

"A swell ten days it's been and you've been fine and dandy to me, too. But say, won't little old Noo York look good! I ain't heard a honk-honk and 'watch your step' and 'step lively' for so long I'll be mistaking the Times building for a tall pine when I get home."

"Heigh-ho—such is life," said Mr. Prokes, "such is life!"

"Ain't it so!"

"We meet and we pass on—we meet and we pass on."

He drew from the lozenge of his emotions slowly, sparing himself none of the bitter-sweet flavor of his thoughts.

"Monday morning, little sister, I'll be waking up to the 6 o'clock chimes of the First Presbyterian and the crowing of Bantum Jimmie."

"I got it over them both with a sixty-cent alarm clock and a ash can symphony."

"And I'll lay there listening to old Mary unlock the summer kitchen and after I hear her turning the windlass to hoist the water from the well I'll be gettin' up myself and——"

"I know the feelin'."

"—and getting down to unlock the store